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ABSTRACT

The Middle Level Demonstration School of the New York City Public Schools, in operation since September 1991, is committed to creating a middle school in which both students and teachers are active participants in a supportive learning community characterized by high standards, mutual respect, and cooperation. Parents are seen as important members of the community and as valuable partners. In 1991-92 the school served 190 students in grades 5 through 7. Evaluation of the program focused on how the organizational structure, assessment practices, and school climate support the goal of an integrated and interactive approach to learning. Teachers agreed that instructional practices such as whole language, hands-on approaches, and the concepts and strategies of the Comprehensive Instructional Management System mathematics program support the interactive approach and have a positive effect on attitudes and skills of students. The use of multicultural themes is being instituted at the school, with six of the nine teachers attempting to incorporate multicultural education. Teachers characterized the overall climate as one of teamwork and mutual support. Recommendations are made for program improvement. (SLD)

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ED360426

OREA Report

MIDDLE LEVEL DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL
1991-92

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Middle Level Demonstration School, in operation since September 1991, is committed to creating a middle school in which both students and teachers are active participants in a supportive learning community characterized by high standards, mutual respect, and cooperation. Parents are seen as important members of this community and as valuable partners in the education of their children. During 1991-92 efforts were directed at establishing a model that will be useful to others similarly interested in reforming middle level education. The school's organizational structure, operating procedures, and instructional program are designed to promote these goals.

Located in J.H.S. 113 in C.S.D. 11, the Demonstration School shares facilities and resources with the larger school, but is self-contained and functions independently. In the 1991-92 school year, the school served 190 students in grades five through seven, none of whom had previous middle school experience. Most students of grades six and seven scored between the 25th and 75th percentiles on the Degree of Reading Power (D.R.P.) test, but approximately one-third of all students in grade five scored below the 25th percentile.

The evaluation of the Middle Level Demonstration School by the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (OREA) for 1991-92 focused primarily on documenting how the organizational structure, instructional and assessment practices, and school climate support its overall goal of developing an integrated and interactive approach to learning. Also explored were the staff development and other assistance provided, efforts to involve parents in the education of their children, and the impact of the school's curricular approach on students' achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics (reported in Part II of this evaluation.)

Teachers agreed that instructional practices, such as whole language, the hands-on approach, and concepts and strategies inherent in CIMS-Math, did support an interactive approach to learning and had a positive impact on the attitudes and skills of children. Teachers listed specific examples of how they integrated subject areas. The use of multicultural themes is nascent in the Demonstration School, but six of the nine teachers reported attempts to incorporate such themes into the curriculum. Teachers commended the CIMS approach for its emphasis on problem solving and for promoting collaboration among teachers. Criticisms of CIMS tended to be aimed at specific aspects of the curricula rather than its overall approach.

Teachers commented on the school's approaches to assessment and remediation in the context of its integrated approach to instruction. They reported using writing folders, response logs, and the evaluation of hands-on work. An OREA assistor introduced

the staff to portfolio assessment. The school's current pull-out approach to remediation, according to teachers, contradicts its holistic philosophy in that it violates the coherence of the integrated curriculum by teaching skills out of context. Only one classroom teacher worked with the remedial reading teacher, while others utilized cooperative learning strategies, such as peer tutoring, and worked with students individually.

Teachers characterized the overall climate of the Demonstration School as one of evolving teamwork and mutual support. Factors that had a positive effect on the climate were scheduling strategies that allowed extended time for interaction, the encouragement of free expression, the willingness of teachers to experiment, and the establishment of a school identity. Factors that slowed the development of a better climate were lack of space for children to vent their frustrations, family problems, negative community influences, and problems deriving from proximity to the larger school. The school took the initiative to involve parents, but some teachers noted that parental involvement was limited, largely because working parents could not readily participate in school activities. Some parents did attend these activities, and a few were able to take advantage of the school's ongoing invitation to parents to attend their children's classes.

Teachers' assessment of staff development was mixed. While citing specific workshops that introduced them to new teaching methods and alternative approaches (whole language, the thematic approach, interdisciplinary learning, multiculturalism, CIMS-Math, and classroom management), they expressed the need for more follow-through. A concern for building student discipline prompted some teachers to urge that future staff development address the special needs and problems of students and their families.

Based on the findings of this report, OREA makes the following recommendations:

- There is a need to explore alternative strategies for meeting the needs of lower-achieving students in ways that are more consistent with the school's holistic approach to education and limited resources. Instruction, whether provided by the classroom teacher or a remedial teacher, should parallel and support the regular curriculum, and focus on the development of concepts and skills within the context of the topics and themes appropriate for the student's grade level.

- Efforts to teach students how to deal effectively with conflict should be continued and expanded, providing students with more explicit training in conflict resolution techniques, as well as opportunities to apply them in

resolving disputes. Such experiences would also support major curricular objectives in that they involve learning and practicing important skills--e.g., listening, speaking, and problem solving--within a meaningful context.

- Consideration should be given to developing a more focused approach to building a school-parent partnership aimed at identifying and supporting mutual goals for children. This might include helping parents to see themselves as educators and to develop confidence in their ability to contribute to their children's academic, social, and emotional development. Activities which allow parents and teachers (and students) at times to assume the role of "teacher," and at others that of the "learner," might promote mutual respect and trust.

- Staff development activities directed at helping teachers to integrate multicultural themes, incorporate cooperative learning techniques, and utilize alternative assessment strategies should be continued and expanded.

- Given the importance of the school's sense of community and collaborative professional relationships to the accomplishment of its goals, there is a need to more carefully define its relationship with J.H.S. 113, the larger school within which it is located.

I. INTRODUCTION

DESCRIPTION

School Philosophy

The Middle Level Demonstration School, in operation since September 1991, is committed to creating a middle school in which both students and teachers are active participants in a supportive learning community characterized by high standards, mutual respect, and cooperation. Parents are seen as important members of this community and as valuable partners in the education of their children. During 1991-92 efforts were directed at establishing a model that will be useful to others similarly interested in reforming middle level education. The school's organizational structure, operating procedures, and instructional program were designed to promote these goals.

Demographics

The school was located on the second floor of J.H.S. 113 in C.S.D. 11, a community grappling with many of the problems faced by the nation's inner cities. While it shared some facilities and resources with the larger school (which has 1,100 students in grades six through eight), the Demonstration School was self-contained and functioned independently. During its first year, it served nearly 200 students in grades five through seven, many of whom were recent arrivals to the United States from the West Indies. None had previous middle school experience.

Student Population

In view of its experimental nature and limited resources and support services--e.g., limited access to the services of a guidance counselor and remedial reading teacher from J.H.S. 113 already overburdened with large caseloads--the school felt that it would not be able to meet the needs of students with reading scores in the lowest quartile (below the 25th percentile). Nor did it seek the highest achieving students. Accordingly, sixth and seventh graders were selected at random from among students in the district's feeder schools who scored between the 25th and 75th percentiles on the Degrees of Reading Power (D.R.P.) test. However, fifth grade students were recruited exclusively from P.S. 16 because this school had an overflow of classes at that grade. The pool of students from which selections could be made was therefore limited, and there was little opportunity to apply reading performance criteria. The reading scores of more than half of the entering fifth grade students were, in fact, below the 50th percentile, and approximately one-third required remedial reading instruction (as did some sixth and seventh graders).

Staffing

The staff comprised a director, who wore many hats--administrator, liaison with the administration of the larger school and district office personnel, staff developer, and teacher--and nine teachers. There were two classes at each grade

level, with 33 children per class in grades six and seven, and 25 per class in grade five.

Instructional Program

The Middle Level Demonstration School's curricular approach is interdisciplinary, and intended to promote an integrated, holistic view of learning, as opposed to the more fragmented approach typical at the middle school level. Instruction, organized around common themes, aims to provide students with a sense of continuity and interrelated-
ness that facilitates learning and makes it more meaningful.

In communication arts and mathematics the Comprehensive Instructional Management System (CIMS) curricula are used, but without the computerized test scoring and reporting system. Both programs, first implemented in New York City schools about a decade ago, are mandated in C.S.D. 11. CIMS-Communication Arts (CIMS-CA), based on the whole language approach, emphasizes the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the use of themes that provide a context for learning, and the incorporation of children's literature. There is also a drama component that introduces students to the world of Shakespeare, increases their appreciation of the theater, provides them with an opportunity to attend a professional performance, and encourages their creative expression. The CIMS-Math program, which is directed at teaching problem solving, includes performance-based objectives and features a cyclical, rather than a topical approach to instruction, whereby math concepts are

periodically reintroduced rather than covered exhaustively at one time.

Basic to the school's vision of a community of learners, and consistent with its interdisciplinary approach, is an emphasis on joint planning and collaboration among teachers, as well as opportunities for sharing and cooperating among students. The teamwork demonstrated by teachers, in effect, serves as a model for students. Empowering teachers to shape the curriculum and encouraging students to assume responsibility for their learning are viewed as important to the teaching-learning process.

Organization and Operating Procedures

In various ways, the school's organization and operating procedures support these principles. At each grade level, the same teacher is responsible for communication arts and social studies, while another teaches math and science. (These four subjects constitute the core curriculum.) These six teachers, with two classes each, have a maximum of 66 students altogether, considerably less than is typical in traditional middle schools and conducive to closer teacher-student relationships.

Built into every school day is meeting time for each pair of teachers (communication arts/social studies and math/science) on the same grade level--"buddy" teachers--to develop themes that provide for the integration of subject areas and children's own experiences, to explore innovative teaching strategies, to plan joint projects, and to discuss other instructional issues. Most teachers also have a common lunch period. In addition, there are

full staff meetings every Wednesday after school; teachers are paid per session, but put in many additional hours. Activities developed by the Spanish and art teachers (both cover all grades) frequently reinforce themes covered in the core curriculum areas; many are designed to further promote students' cultural pride and appreciation for the multicultural society in which they live. (The school's other teacher is responsible for physical education.)

Flexible scheduling and block programming allow for double periods, making it possible to extend the time spent on selected instructional activities and provide opportunities for additional professional interactions. Blocked periods of 100 minutes (two 50-minute periods combined)--one devoted to communication arts and social studies, and the other to math and science--also promote a more integrated approach to learning.

Another feature of the Demonstration School designed to foster a sense of community and collaboration is the Great Hall period, similar in purpose to a community town hall meeting. Held in the auditorium during the last period every Wednesday and attended by all students and staff, it is a forum for sharing, discussing, debating, and planning. Students are encouraged to talk about things of concern or interest to them--such as a project they are working on or an idea for a school activity they would like to propose--and to listen respectfully to others. As such, it provides lessons in leadership, cooperation, and communication. Importantly, social activities in which students

and staff have opportunities to get to know one another better are among the joint projects undertaken.

Role of Parents

While parents are welcome to make an appointment at any time to meet with school staff or observe school activities, there is a monthly Open House, when parents are invited to sit in on their children's classes, become acquainted with what they are learning, and observe how teachers work with students. Parents are expected to sign make-up work (given after an absence) and homework (given every day), and to support the efforts of the school, overall--e.g., by encouraging their children's self-respect, stressing appropriate school attitudes and behavior, and participating in reading activities with them at home.

Professional Development

Consistent with its identity as a learning community for teachers as well as students, the Demonstration School provides staff with various opportunities for professional growth. Some are inherent in the school's philosophy and an integral part of its operating procedures. This includes support from the school's director, who works with teachers in groups and individually, and the collegial relationships that evolve as teachers routinely collaborate on instructional issues. Among other sources of staff development are the CIMS-CA staff developer for C.S.D. 11's middle schools, the district-based CIMS-Math curriculum leader, an assistor from the Office of

Research, Evaluation, and Assessment* who works with staff to explore alternative assessment strategies, a specialist in the whole language approach, and visiting artists from the Theatre for a New Audience who assisted with the drama component.

FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

OREA's evaluation of the Demonstration School's first year of operation focused primarily on documenting how the organizational structure, instructional and assessment practices, and school climate supported its overall goal of developing an integrated and interactive approach to learning. Also explored were the staff development and other assistance provided, as well as efforts to involve parents in the education of their children. Of interest, too, was the impact of the school's curricular approach on students' achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Data sources for the 1991-92 evaluation included the following:

- review of relevant documents and memoranda;
- interviews with the school's director and each of the nine teachers;
- interviews with the district staff developer and the OREA assistor;
- observations of some key school program activities;

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*As part of OREA's Accountability Project, assistors work with schools to provide on-site technical assistance in developing approaches to assessment that are consistent with their goals and objectives.

- analysis of differences between students' pre- and posttest scores on holistically scored writing samples;
- analysis of differences between students' scores on the spring 1991 and spring 1992 Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) in mathematics.

SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

This report (Part I) consists of three chapters. Chapter I provides an overall description of the Demonstration School, the focus of the current evaluation, and the evaluation methodology. Staff perceptions of the school's philosophy and implementation during its first year of operation are presented in Chapter II. Conclusions and recommendations are included in Chapter III. Student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics will be reported in Part II of this evaluation, available under separate cover.

III. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICES

In explaining what prompted their interest in being part of the Demonstration School, five teachers mentioned the opportunity to implement new ideas and the challenge of the school's program, specifically its interdisciplinary and whole language approach. The other four teachers were assigned to the school by the district. Eight of the nine Demonstration School teachers were seasoned educators with at least four years of teaching experience; three had taught for 12 or more years. The only relatively new teacher was in her second year. The staff developer had been in her position for ten years and working with the CIMS-CA project for five years.

INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES

CIMS and the Whole Language Approach

As described by its teachers, the Demonstration School's instructional practices clearly support an integrated and interactive approach to learning. Teachers reported using a wide range of whole language concepts and strategies that help students to make connections, solve problems, reflect on their experiences, and share knowledge and skills among themselves. Some of the strategies teachers explored were immersion in literature, the use of literature-based texts and themes, silent reading, novels that integrate communication arts with social studies, writing folders, journals and logs, self-editing, semantic mapping, and methods of cooperative learning. To add an

experiential, hands-on dimension to interdisciplinary and cooperative learning, students cooked Mexican food and, with the art teacher, created African masks and origami in conjunction with social studies.

Teachers spoke very positively about the impact that the whole language approach has had on students' attitudes and skills. They said that it heightened student interest and motivation, and that children found the program challenging. Teachers based these conclusions on their observations of children engaged in learning situations. Some children talked about school subjects, while others contributed information and experiences from their particular backgrounds. Teachers also noted that children looked forward to silent reading, especially when they were free to choose their own books. Stimulated by the cooperative environment, they interacted more and gradually became comfortable with asking their peers for help. In addition to these observations of behavior, teachers reported that students' writing skills improved. For some shy children, writing became an important way of expressing themselves.

When asked what concepts and strategies inherent in the CIMS-Math curriculum they used, the math/science teachers listed manipulatives, the cyclical approach (reintroduction of topics over time), cooperative learning, problem of the day, warm-up exercises, and other teaching techniques suggested in the teacher's manual. They also commented on the impact that CIMS-Math has had on students' attitudes and achievement. Children,

they said, enjoyed the journal work and the teamwork. Teachers also observed that students liked the idea of using more than one strategy for solving a problem. Their enthusiasm was evident in their increased efforts and in the pleasure they displayed when they were rewarded for those efforts. It was evident, as well, in the way they explained how they arrived at answers.

Teachers cited specific examples of how they integrated subject areas. A common strategy was reading and writing on topics in social studies and other areas. Fifth grade students, for example, read and wrote on the environment, and their work was followed up by the science teacher. Through The Diary of Anne Frank and Number the Stars, biographies of children growing up during World War II, sixth grade students learned about the Holocaust. They visited the Museum of the City of New York to see a photo/video exhibit on the Holocaust, then related what they saw to such historical issues as slavery. The seventh grade curriculum began with pre-Columbian American history. Children studied Native American culture together with geography, reading, research, and writing, and created maps and portraits of explorers in art class. A Light in the Forest, a novel about a Euro-American raised by Native Americans, served as a springboard for a discussion of prejudice.

Applying math skills to the study of science, students graphed weather. They integrated scale measurement with map skills and applied set theory and the Venn diagram (a visual device used for making comparisons) to character studies in

literature. Using the laws of heredity, they learned about probability. Students applied their reading skills to science by reading about nature in the newspapers. The physical education teacher pointed out that sports provide an opportunity to teach physical forces, such as velocity, speed, and gravity, and that math enters into games through scorekeeping.

The Demonstration School also made use of unifying themes to integrate subject areas. For example, the Shakespeare project brought history and drama together. Teachers also implemented the theme of "Forces" on a schoolwide level, by which children learned about forces in nature, as well as in history and human relations.

Multicultural Themes

The Demonstration School has integrated multicultural themes into its curriculum to a lesser extent than it has the integration of subject areas, although six of the nine teachers said they used multicultural themes. Several teachers said that they would like to pursue this area further, and expressed the need for more staff development to address it. While one math/science teacher asserted that mathematics and science are more objective than communication arts and social studies, and therefore do not lend themselves well to the use of multicultural themes, another math/science teacher disagreed. She explained how she reviewed the achievements of black mathematicians during Black History month and taught the Arabic and Roman contributions to numerals in the history of math. The art teacher referred

again to her lessons in origami and African masks, this time in the context of multicultural education. Although he claimed that games are universal, the physical education teacher added that if he had the equipment, he would teach cricket, a game that might already be popular among the many Jamaican students in the Demonstration School.

Effect on Teaching

OREA asked teachers to comment on other ways that the CIMS instructional philosophy affected their teaching practices. Teachers noted that they did more hands-on instruction and were less tied to textbooks than they would be in a more conventional program. CIMS, they said, offered many ideas for follow-up, which they took advantage of in teaching the application of skills. A math/science teacher noted that the cyclical nature of CIMS-Math helped him to keep his classes "moving," that is, not lingering on topics. Teachers found that the CIMS emphasis on writing promoted self-expression and led to more interactive classes in which students engaged in group discussions. The program, some teachers noted, facilitates the integration of subject areas and brings teachers together in a work relationship not characteristic of other approaches. The physical education teacher surmised that when children learn cooperatively in other classes, there may be a carryover into gym class, where teamwork is essential.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Teachers commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the CIMS approach. The communication arts/social studies teachers said that the approach encourages interaction among children. The hands-on strategy and the wealth of activities inherent in CIMS, they explained, provides opportunities for students to interact in a variety of ways, thereby promoting a greater inclination to share ideas and help each other. The thematic approach then links what children learn to real life. More pragmatically, teachers liked the CIMS program as a guide to the New York State Essential Learning Objectives (E.L.O.s). The program, they said, is especially good for new teachers.

In discussing the major strengths of CIMS, the math/science teachers identified the cyclical approach, which provides variety and allows skills to build over time, and the program's emphasis on developing children's problem-solving abilities rather than focusing exclusively on computation skills. They praised the program for being well-paced and structured, albeit with room for flexibility. Along with the communication arts/social studies teachers, they commended CIMS' emphasis on teachers working together to integrate subject areas.

The Demonstration School teachers had less to say about the weaknesses of the CIMS approach. One claimed that CIMS may impede the progress of advanced students, but added that this is not a problem in the Demonstration School, where few children scored at the highest levels on reading tests. A math/science

teacher was concerned that spiralling homework does not provide sufficient opportunities for practice and skills reinforcement. Other weaknesses cited by teachers pertained to specific aspects of the CIMS program rather than its overall approach. For example, two communication arts/social studies teachers said that some activities are not motivating, some stories are not interesting for the children, some vocabulary is too difficult, and some areas need to be more graphic and varied.

Drama Component

The drama component used theater to actively engage children in the learning process. Five Demonstration School teachers participated in the project. Their involvement included pre- and postplay workshops in connection with the professional performance they and their students would attend, and assisting visiting artists who helped children prepare for their own performance. All teachers who took part in these training activities considered them to be moderately or very useful.

Teachers pinpointed the most valuable outcomes of the drama experience for their children. Some referred to the growth of students' sense of self-worth. Children learned positive things about their own abilities, such as memorizing lines and overcoming stage fright. Another positive outcome was teamwork, consistent with the school's emphasis on building a community of learners. The staff developer described the project as "an opportunity for the whole site to work collaboratively." Finally, the experience exposed students to Shakespeare and

enlarged their knowledge base. One teacher claimed that Shakespeare's works still have meaning for children, but another contended that non-Shakespearian theater ought to complement the present drama component. The staff developer hoped that in the 1992-93 school year a Shakespearean theme could be related to a CIMS-CA theme in order to more closely integrate the Shakespeare experience with the school curriculum.

Assessment and Remediation

In March, the OREA assistor conducted a workshop in portfolio assessment with the Demonstration School teachers during their weekly staff development period. The assistor suggested the use of oral activities in preparing students to share their work with others. She used the results of a preliminary investigation of assessment practices already in place in the school as a springboard for further discussion. Some teachers, for example, were already using response logs* but needed a clearer and more common understanding of their purpose and value. The assistor reviewed portfolio assessment, then related the probable outcomes of the process to goals that she had worked with teachers to identify several weeks earlier.

In interviews with OREA, teachers enumerated a variety of assessment approaches, both traditional and alternative, that they used during the 1991-92 school year. Some of the

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*A vehicle for encouraging student writing for various purposes--e.g., understanding the power of language, developing critical thinking skills, and reflecting on reading and personal experiences.

traditional methods included unit tests from social studies and other textbooks, quizzes, short-answer tests, cross-matching, open-book tests, essay exams at the completion of novels, vocabulary tests in Spanish, and art history exams. Among the alternative approaches were character studies in communication arts, writing folders, response logs, children's reviews of their own progress, charts for plot development and plot contrast, written reflection on the Shakespeare project, and evaluation of hands-on work, such as the making of body system models and the use of microscopes. The staff developer pointed out that educators around the nation are in the process of refining alternative strategies for assessing student performance.

Teachers in the Demonstration School generally believed that the school's current approach to remediation contradicts the holistic philosophy of the school. One explained that pull-out programs are disruptive for children because they isolate reading and violate the coherence of the integrated curricula by teaching skills out of context. Only one classroom teacher reported spending joint planning time with the remedial reading teacher, who primarily served the larger school and had a large caseload. This communication arts/social studies teacher worked with the remedial reading teacher, who introduced her to cooperative learning techniques. The staff developer explained that while the Demonstration School lacks the resources to meet the needs of large numbers of remedial students, CIMS-CA uses techniques that meet the needs of students of all achievement levels.

Classroom teachers who did not spend joint planning time with remedial teachers described the strategies they devised for meeting the needs of their low-achieving students. They mentioned pairing these students with strong peers, employing other forms of cooperative learning, giving extra-credit work, meeting with the school psychologist, and reviewing students' work with them on an individual basis. A math/science teacher found that he had to simplify the curriculum and supplement with assignments that are designed to motivate students.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

Relationships

Teachers characterized the Demonstration School's climate, specifically with respect to teacher-teacher, student-teacher, and student-student relationships. Three teachers said that teamwork, cooperation, and mutual support among the instructional staff were outstanding. The others pointed out that the program was only in its first year, and teacher-teacher relationships are evolving. As one teacher put it, "We're working the kinks out." Citing integration of subject areas as a top priority of the school program, another teacher implied that teachers need more interaction.

Half of the teachers characterized student-teacher relationships as good. One explained that because of the emphasis on individual attention for students, teachers know all of the students in the Demonstration School; another said that children see teachers as "friends." The other half of the

teachers gave a more mixed review of student-teacher relationships. They felt that students respected the teachers on their grade level, but needed to learn to respect the others. Discipline, they noted, was a problem, and contended that the children needed a guidance counselor. As with teacher-teacher relationships, they acknowledged that their relationships with students were still evolving.

Most teachers saw students' relationships with their peers as the most problematic, although improving. Early in the school year, students were very competitive. Low self-esteem, plus a lack of social skills frequently led to conflict. Relationships began to improve with class trips and other activities, like the Great Hall and the Shakespeare project, which enabled children to get to know one another and appreciate and respect differences. Some staff believed that the gradual establishment of a school identity also went a long way to enhancing relationships.

Factors Influencing Climate

Teachers attributed the overall positive climate of the school to diverse factors. They stressed the 100-minute period and the weekly Great Hall as scheduling strategies that provided opportunities for students and staff to spend extended time together, express their concerns and ideas, and develop a sense of community. Teachers cited their own teamwork as yet another factor in promoting positive interaction among students, who at times emulated this cooperative model. According to several teachers, the casual, relaxed environment of the school enhanced

the climate. Teachers sincerely cared about children, and they created an atmosphere for free expression--an "open forum." The flexibility of the program allowed teachers to experiment, for example, with report cards that included verbal reports. That the teachers were committed to the school was seen as a major ingredient of its positive climate. Teachers also commented on areas in need of improvement, such as the lack of space for children to engage recreational sports activities or otherwise release pent-up energy. (At present, the school has no yard.) One teacher attributed many of the school's difficulties to the needs of families living in inner-cities and to negative community influences. The school's director, as well as several teachers, noted that students from J.H.S. 113, and particularly older students, sometimes roamed the hallways and were disruptive. One obstacle to greater collaboration among teachers noted by the school's director was the fact that Demonstration School teachers were expected to provide preparation period coverage for teachers of J.H.S. 113, which meant that there was less time available for joint planning with their colleagues.

Parent Participation

OREA asked teachers what specific activities, if any, parents got involved with. Teachers cited open houses, assemblies, school productions and trips, Parent Association meetings, and awards assemblies. A few parents responded to the Demonstration School's ongoing invitation to observe their children's classes. Parents also participated in the Shakespeare

project, the fall talent show, a bake sale, the Thanksgiving feast, and Valentine's Day and Christmas parties. A multi-cultural luncheon was suggested for the future. However, some teachers noted low parent involvement and explained that parents, because of their jobs (many work twelve-hour days), have difficulty scheduling in-school activities.

The school undertook several initiatives to involve families. Parents received letters of invitation that notified them of events, such as the bake sale. They also received letters concerning the behavior of their children, both positive and negative, and the staff hopes to send more of these in the next school year. Teachers occasionally called parents at home to let them know they were available to discuss children's problems. One teacher said that for the 1992-93 school year, the school hoped to offer parenting classes, a strategy that would involve parents and offer them help in understanding and dealing with their children.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Topics Addressed

All Demonstration School teachers said that they took part in various professional development activities during the 1991-92 school year. The whole language approach and how to use literature in the classroom were key topics addressed in these activities. Several teachers took a summer course on whole language and interdisciplinary learning. Another remembered a conference, held on Long Island, which provided opportunities to

brainstorm about whole language strategies with teachers from other schools. One teacher attended a CIMS-paid whole language weekend seminar in Ossining, New York, in December, and a workshop led by the director of Middle Level Education for the New York City Public Schools on the thematic approach. The seventh grade communication arts/social studies teacher attended a seminar on school newspapers, after which she became the advisor to the Demonstration School student newspaper. The assistor from OREA held several sessions in the school, including one on alternative assessment and the use of portfolios. Other topics that teachers identified as part of staff development efforts were multiculturalism, CIMS-Math, classroom management, and dealing with the problem of weapons in the middle schools.

Sources of Assistance

When asked who provided staff development this year, teachers most frequently cited the OREA assistor and the C.S.D. 11 CIMS-CA staff developer. Other sources of training were the Demonstration School director, colleagues in the school, and central CIMS-Math staff.

The CIMS-CA staff developer described the support she provided the Demonstration School in the 1991-92 school year. This included individual meetings with teachers, participation in teachers' conferences, workshops, and classroom observations to focus on writing, interdisciplinary themes, learning logs, and cooperative learning. She attended the Great Hall, arranged for class trips, contributed to the Shakespeare project, and provided

materials and books. Sometimes, the staff developer served as a troubleshooter; for example, she formed a student court to handle a specific discipline problem, and demonstrated to children how problems could be worked out cooperatively.

Teachers' Assessment

Teachers' comments on the usefulness of the support provided this year were mixed. Some gave high ratings to the teaching methods and alternative approaches they learned. For one teacher, a how-to-use-literature workshop offered valuable alternatives to the basal reader, and included advice on structuring cooperative learning, as well. A math/science teacher called the CIMS-Math training "excellent," and the Spanish teacher was pleased that much of the staff development was geared to communication arts.

However, teachers criticized some professional development activities for lack of follow-through, citing, for example, some sessions on whole language. More work on alternative assessment is needed, one teacher claimed, because it is a new issue for most educators. The staff developer maintained that teachers need more concentrated staff development, beginning early in the school year, and suggested the use of substitutes to free teachers to attend workshops. One teacher reiterated the need for greater discipline. One of his colleagues argued for greater understanding of and sensitivity to the particular needs and problems of the students in the Demonstration School.

Additional Assistance Needed

Teachers indicated what additional staff development or other assistance they needed. They requested sessions on specific subject areas, namely, science, social studies, and Spanish. Other teachers wanted more help disciplining and motivating students, and enhancing their self-esteem. The CIMS-CA staff developer suggested that the school hire an administrative assistant to free the school's director to provide more staff development, particularly in the context of actual classroom situations. Teachers, she argued, need time to see the director in action with the children. She added a reminder that much of the director's time went into troubleshooting during the 1991-92 school year because the program was new.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL

Distinguishing Features

OREA asked teachers to consider how the Demonstration School differed from traditional middle schools. Four said that they had not taught previously in middle schools and therefore were unable to respond, although one guessed that the main differences were the integrated curriculum and the whole language approach. Others cited the program's flexibility; its integration of communication arts, social studies, mathematics, and science; its smaller classes; and enrichment through literature, class trips, and such speakers as a computer specialist and a poet. More than one teacher agreed that the Demonstration School differed in that movement from class to class was minimal in order to promote more

interaction among students. According to a communication arts/social studies teacher, the school instilled a sense of responsibility and working toward goals, and was fun for children.

Impact on Teachers

Teachers considered how the differences between traditional middle schools and the Demonstration School affected their instructional role. The sense of community that the school instilled led one teacher to develop greater tolerance and another to try more diligently to challenge and motivate children. The integrated curriculum made a math/science teacher more aware of the benefits of linking and planning with coworkers. The district staff developer noted that teachers participated in a new, more demanding way, largely because the school's small size fosters more intense relationships among students and teachers. Some teachers, she said, were looking for this kind of experience, although some were more adaptable than others. In general, teachers felt they were treated as professionals and that their opinions were valued.

Impact on Students

Teachers agreed that the Demonstration School experience was a change for students. They believed that children who attended the school perceived themselves as part of a community, and received more individual attention than they would have in a conventional setting. The instructional program explored the world beyond the classroom, so that the skills students acquired

were more meaningful. The staff developer observed that "real leaders have emerged," even among the "difficult students." Children had more input and felt more important. Teachers believed that because children knew their opinions were valued, they felt free to express themselves. As one teacher put it, "Now, they are chatterboxes." Teachers also pointed out that the children established an identity as Demonstration School students, and felt special being a part of the program.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Middle Level Demonstration School opened in September 1991. Located in J.H.S. 113 in C.S.D. 11, it shared facilities and resources with the larger school but was self-contained and functioned independently. During the 1991-92 school year the Demonstration School worked to develop a learning community in which students, teachers, and parents were active participants. The school's curricular approach was interdisciplinary and intended to promote an integrated, holistic view of learning. Instruction was organized around common themes. OREA investigated how the organizational structure, instruction and assessment practices, and school climate supported these goals.

Teachers agreed that instructional practices did support an interactive approach to learning. They cited whole language concepts and strategies and a hands-on approach, and spoke positively of the impact of these strategies on the attitudes and skills of children. Teachers reported that concepts and strategies inherent in CIMS-Math (e.g., manipulatives, journal work, and the use of more than one tactic for solving a problem) also affected children's attitudes and achievement positively. There was considerable evidence of teachers' integration of subject areas. The use of multicultural themes is nascent in the Demonstration School, but six of the nine teachers reported attempts to incorporate such themes into the curriculum.

Teachers said that the instructional philosophy of the school encouraged more extensive use of hands-on teaching, less reliance on textbooks, more interactive classes, and a closer working relationship among teachers. They commended the CIMS approach for its emphasis on problem-solving and collaboration among teachers. Criticisms of CIMS tended to be aimed at specific aspects of the curricula rather than at its overall approach.

Teachers began to employ both traditional and alternative methods of assessing student performance that complement the school's integrated approach to instruction. They experimented with writing folders, response logs, and the evaluation of hands-on work. An OREA assistor introduced the staff to portfolio assessment and related probable outcomes to goals of the Demonstration School.

The school's current pull-out approach to remediation, according to teachers, contradicts the holistic philosophy of the school in that it violates the coherence of the integrated curriculum by teaching skills out of context.

Teachers assessed the climate of the Demonstration School in terms of relationships among teachers and students. Teamwork and mutual support within the staff were outstanding, some said, while others observed that staff relationships are still evolving. Teachers saw their relationships with students as more problematic but also evolving. Some students viewed teachers as "friends," but others presented discipline problems. Students'

relationships among themselves, according to teachers, were the most problematic, with conflict generated by low self-esteem and a lack of social skills. Factors that had a positive effect on the climate were scheduling strategies that allowed extended time for interaction, the encouragement of free expression, the willingness of teachers to experiment, and the establishment of a school identity. Factors that slowed the development of a better climate were lack of space for children to release pent-up energy, negative community influences, and problems deriving from the school's proximity to J.H.S. 113.

The school took the initiative to involve parents, but some teachers noted that parental involvement was limited, largely because working parents could not readily participate in school activities.

All Demonstration School teachers took part in professional development activities during the 1991-92 school year. Topics included whole language, the thematic approach, interdisciplinary learning, CIMS-Math, multiculturalism, and classroom management. The OREA assistor, the district CIMS-CA staff developer, the Demonstration School director, and central CIMS-Math staff provided most of this assistance. Teachers' assessment of staff development was mixed. While citing specific workshops that introduced them to new teaching methods and alternative approaches, they expressed the need for more follow-through. A concern for building student discipline prompted some teachers to

urge that future staff development address the special needs and problems of students and their families.

In general, teachers commended the Demonstration School for its flexibility, the integrated curriculum, the rising level of student interaction, the sense of responsibility that the school instills, and making learning enjoyable. They believed that children were learning to use skills in ways that were meaningful beyond the classroom. Teachers said that they shared with students a sense that they were part of a community.

Overall, the accomplishments of the Demonstration School during its first year of operation hold much promise for the establishment of a learning community that meets the needs of middle level students. Progress toward the development of an integrated approach to curriculum, a collaborative spirit, and attentiveness to students' academic, emotional and social development, were evident. New ways of relating and working together were evolving, both for students and teachers. There was recognition not only of the importance of parents' involvement in the education of their children, but of the school's need to explore more effective ways of facilitating this. The staff's commitment to students and openness to change, as well as a willingness to acknowledge areas requiring improvement, would seem to be other harbingers of future success.

Based on the findings of this report, OREA makes the following recommendations:

- Alternative strategies for meeting the needs of lower-achieving students in ways that are more consistent with the school's holistic approach to education and limited resources need to be explored. Instruction, whether provided by the classroom teacher or a remedial teacher, should parallel and support the regular curriculum, and focus on the development of concepts and skills within the context of the topics and themes appropriate for the student's grade level.

- Efforts to teach students how to deal effectively with conflict should be continued and expanded, providing students with more explicit training in conflict resolution techniques, as well as opportunities to apply them in resolving disputes. Such experiences would also support major curricular objectives in that they involve learning and practicing important skills--e.g., listening, speaking, and problem solving--within a meaningful context.

- Consideration should be given to developing a more focused approach to building a school-parent partnership aimed at identifying and supporting mutual goals for children. This might include helping parents to see themselves as educators and to develop confidence in their ability to contribute to their children's academic, social, and emotional development. Activities which allow parents and teachers (and students) at times to assume the role of "teacher," and at others that of the "learner," might promote mutual respect and trust.

- Staff development activities directed at helping teachers to integrate multicultural themes, incorporate cooperative learning techniques, and utilize alternative assessment strategies should be continued and expanded.

- Given the importance of the school's sense of community and collaborative professional relatioships to the accomplishment of its goals, there is a need to more carefully define its relationship with J.H.S. 113, the larger school within which it is located.